

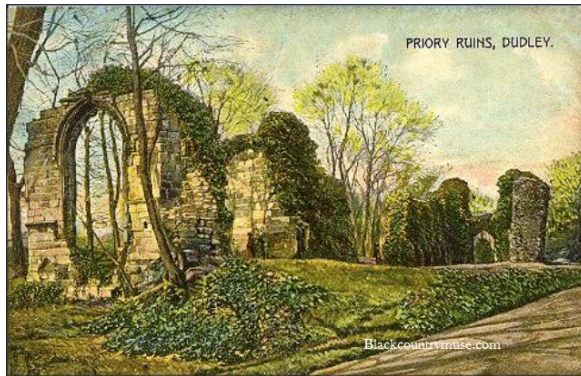
Bibles, Coal and Canals

Black Country Skidmores

1600 - 1901

(with special thanks and acknowledgement of the research by Linda Moffatt, author of *Skidmore Families of the Black Country and Birmingham 1600-1900*)

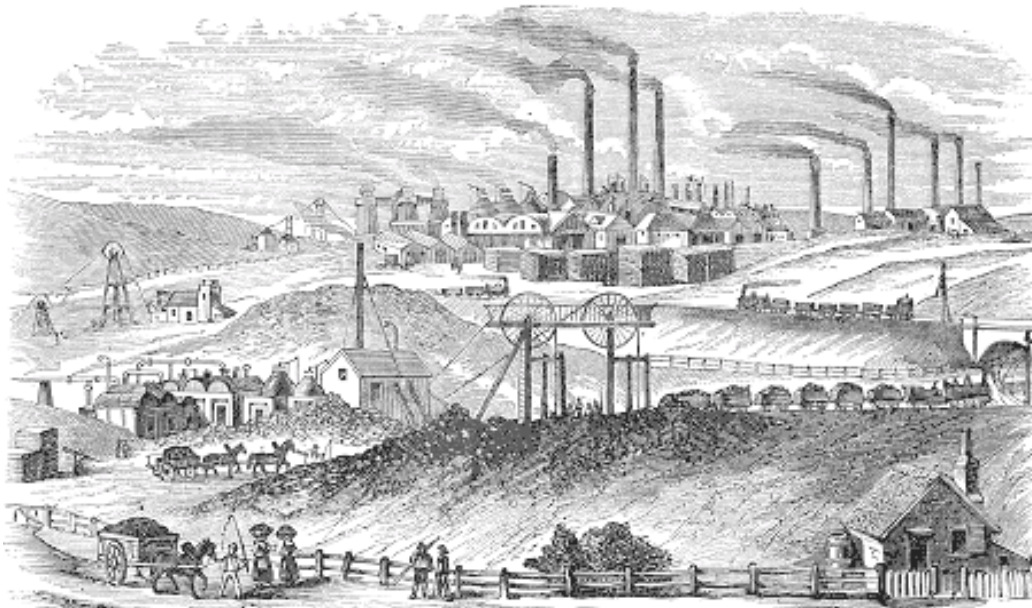
Monasteries to mining



Ruins of Dudley Priory, one of the victims of Henry VIII. Postcard c1912. Source: blackcountrymuse.com

The 'Black Country' is situated in the West Midlands of England, west of Birmingham, so called because it was historically one of the centres of the coal and iron-stone industries. Skidmores have lived in this area at least since the early 1600s, and had been involved in these industries for many generations. Mining had been part of the economy of the area from the 1300s but did not dominate farming and agriculture until Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries in the 1500s. The Crown then took over monastic land and sold leases to encourage mining the rich coal seams

beneath. During the 18th and 19th centuries the appetite of the Industrial Revolution for more coal and iron gave rise to a great system of canals to speed up the transportation of resources from the West Midlands to the manufacturing centres around the country. Our line of Skidmores had been employed in all these activities - iron, coal and canals, for at least eight generations.



The Earl of Dudley's Thick Coal Pits c1850 from an etched drawing, artist unknown. Source: localhistory.scit.wlv.ac.uk

Early Skidmores 17th century

Our Skidmores from the Black Country can be traced back to at least the early 17th century when **William Skidmore**, a collier of the Kingswinford parish married widow **Joyce Bache (nee Hawkes)** in 1625 at the local church. Joyce (either the daughter of butcher/ale-house keeper Paul Hawkes or a William Hawkes) had at least four children from her first marriage to collierⁱ Humphrey Bache (also spelt Batch). William and Joyce lived in the south-east of the Kingswinford parish, around Brierley Hill, Bretell and Pensnett Chase.

Before that time, Skidmore families involved in coal mining were known of in Somerset, Derbyshire, Shropshire and Worcestershire. The Skidmore name is also spelt Scudamore (among other spellings) and can be traced back to an 11th century Norman knight from Herefordshire, Ralph de Scudemer.



St. Mary's Church, Kingswinford from a 1974 postcard. Many Skidmores were baptised, married and buried there from the 17th century onwards. Source: worcesteranddudleyhistoricchurches.org.uk



11th century tympanum at St Mary's Kingswinford - relief sculpture of St Michael slaying the dragon. Relocated to the vestry in the 19th century but the Skidmores would have seen it in the south porch. Source: Tudor Barlow flickr.com and Worcestershire Historic Churches Trust.

William Skidmore (c1595-c1663) and Joyce Bache (nee Hawkes c1595-1676)

Like many others of the Black Country at that time, William earned a living mixing coal mining with small farming. The following records give us a little insight into William and Joyce Skidmore's lives:

1625 daughter Margaret is baptised at Kingswinford

1629 granted a lease of 2 acres of land on part of Ravensitch Coppice by Lord Dudley of Dudley Castle. Permitted to build a cottage.

1628/9 son William baptised at Kingswinford

1630 assigned the lease of their land at Ravensitch to Richard Southwicke

1632 son **Francis** baptised at Kingswinford

1635 daughter Ann baptised at Kingswinford

1643 fined 2d to avoid attending the Michaelmas Frankpledge (local men who took the responsibility to keep the peace of the parish)

1647 daughter Margaret marries James Seager, a collier

1654 daughter Ann marries Richard Phibbs, a nailor at Kingswinford

1664 William dies, buried in churchyard at Kingswinford

1665 Hearth Tax records William (obviously now Joyce) in the hamlet of Brettell

1674-5 Poor Rate assessment - Joyce to pay 6d

1676 Joyce dies, buried in churchyard at Kingswinford

The following is from the Will of William Skidmore, proved in May 1664, listing a summary of his goods and chattels left to Joyce:

'A table board and frame, a joined chest, 2 fire grates, fire shovel and tongs, a pair of weights, 2 iron pots, 4 brass kettles, 6 pewter dishes, a flagon, 2 mares, 13 sheep, 2 loads of hay, a half-headed bed and bedding, 2 other beds and bedding, 2 little coffers, 2 wheels, coarse hemp yarn, 2 benches and a form, 2 chairs, 2 spits, pair of gale-hooks (kitchen cranes), and pot hooks, a kneading trough, a loom, a frying pan, plate and basting spoon, 6 pairs of sheets, 2 tablecloths, husbandry implements, "and things forgot or out of sight", and Bonds owing by gentleman, Richard Brindley.'

These totalled £78 and 8 shillings suggesting that William Skidmore was fairly comfortable for a collier.

Colliers and nailors

William and Joyce's male descendants were also colliers living in the Kingswinford, Amblecote and Oldswinford parishes during the 17th century. They married daughters of colliers and nailorsⁱⁱ from the same district and many had large families of up to ten or eleven children.

By the early 18th century Skidmore families had been occupying *Stamford House* at Amblecote Bank, leased from Lord Stamford. Following is a description of the property written in 1905 by Jeremiah Skidmore, great-great-great grandson of William.



Stamford House c1912, with Jeremiah Jnr's son-in-law, Albert Jungermann, with his two young sons, and Percy, one of Jeremiah's sons. Source: *The Blackcountryman* journal of the Black Country Society.

'Situated on the northern slopes of the River Stour – at Amblecote Bank near Stourbridge – at the extreme Staffordshire boundary, and within a few hundred yards of the stream which divides Staffordshire from Worcestershire, and stands picturesquely the peaceful homestead locally known as *Stamford House*. Although within its immediate surroundings there are collieries and factories where the toiling masses are earning the wherewithal to keep body and soul together, yet anyone visiting the spot would be struck with amazement at the seclusion of the homestead on the hill.'

Wesley preaching at Stamford House

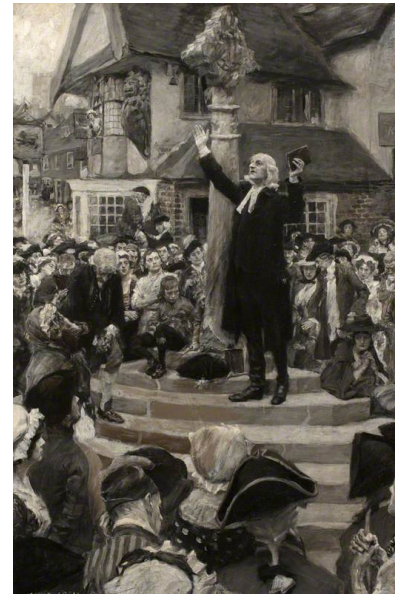
According to Skidmore descendants the evangelist John Wesley would conduct a service from the large kitchen at *Stamford House*, and due to his overwhelming popularity an opening had to be made in the kitchen ceiling to the room above so 'Wesley would stand on a stool in the kitchen with his head halfway through the aperture in the ceiling leaving little room for movement – the aperture being only a foot wide,..... the trap door was still in existence in 1968.'

At that time William Skidmore's great grandson **Benjamin Skidmore** (1718-80) and his wife **Mary** (b1721 nee Hatton) were living there. Their fifth child, our ancestor **Thomas** (1750-1821), was born there and he and his wife **Mary** (nee Walker 1751-1837) were the next family to occupy *Stamford House* all their lives. Their youngest son Jeremiah recorded in his bible his parents' deaths. On his father he wrote (original spelling included) 'It wanted about 22 minits of 6 oclock happy are the dead that die in the Lord as I verily believe he did.'

And most affectionately, he wrote of his mother:

'Thus died one of the greatest Peace Makers in a family. One who never sowed discord in familyes among friends or nebour's eather in the churches or out. She was one of the kindest, one of the lovingest one of the mercyfulest one of the tenderheartest one of the best of Mothers that ever had the care of a family under the Sun. The loss of such a Mother I cannot help but morn and grief but my loss is her Eternal Gain, O that God would help me to be diligent in working out my Salvation that I may meet her in heaven to part no more.'

All of Thomas and Mary's sons were involved in the coal industry – all as miners at some stage. However, with the Skidmores being devout followers of Wesley, it is not surprising that someone in the family would become a preacher. Young Jeremiah was the first of several Skidmores that followed this vocation not only preaching sermons but also in the administration and organisation of Wesleyan and Methodist activities in their district.



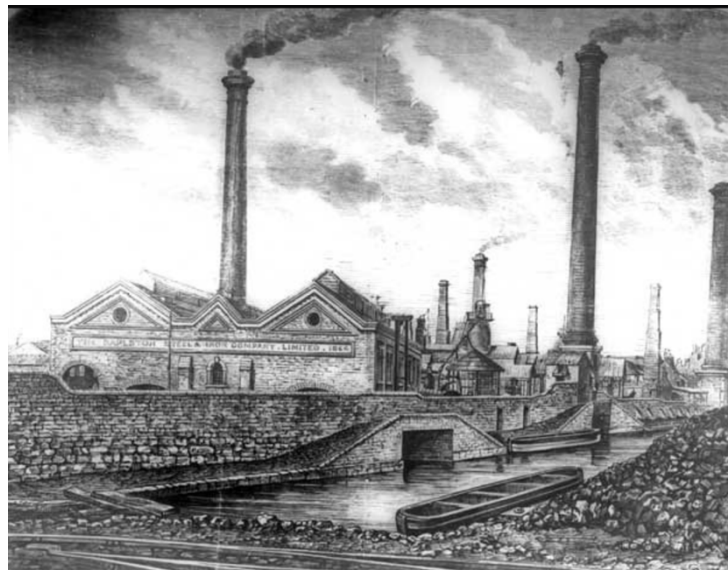
John Wesley Preaching from the Steps of a Market Cross by William Hatherell (1855 -1928) from John Wesley's House and the Museum of Methodism. Wesley preached at the Skidmore's *Stamford House* at Amblecote Bank.
Source: artful.org

Jeremiah remained in Amblecote at *Stamford House* but all his siblings moved a little further away to Wednesbury, Dudley, and Tipton to continue working in the iron and coal industries.

West Bromwich iron and coal

This line of Skidmores mostly lived in and around the West Bromwich area of Staffordshire. Over the 19th century West Bromwich grew from about 5,000 in 1800 to around 65,000 by 1901. Early on, the town had an iron works and many associated manufacturing industries (eg the making of nails, buckles, watch-chains and buttons) had provided a living there. Originally, these were based on the importation of the raw materials of coal and iron-ore. However, from the late 1700s these raw materials were now being mined locally and this stimulated a huge expansion of the secondary iron industries. Many iron foundries for both light and heavy castings were established. Examples of products were hollowareⁱⁱⁱ (metal pots, bowls etc.) engineering components, gas and water pipes, tools, nuts, bolts and screws, roofing, girders, tanks, boats, chains and springs, to name a few. The expansion of the railways demanded even more wrought iron products and wars demanded gun components and bayonets. The system of canals provided convenient access to ports and markets across the country.

The Darlaston Steel & Iron Company's works between the canal and Heath Road. Source: <http://www.historywebsite.co.uk/>



The coal and iron industries were inextricably linked so when the supplies of the South Staffordshire coalfields started to run out in the later 19th century, the secondary iron industries suffered also. However, this was a gradual decline that took several decades. Today, all the areas the Skidmores lived in are part of West Bromwich.



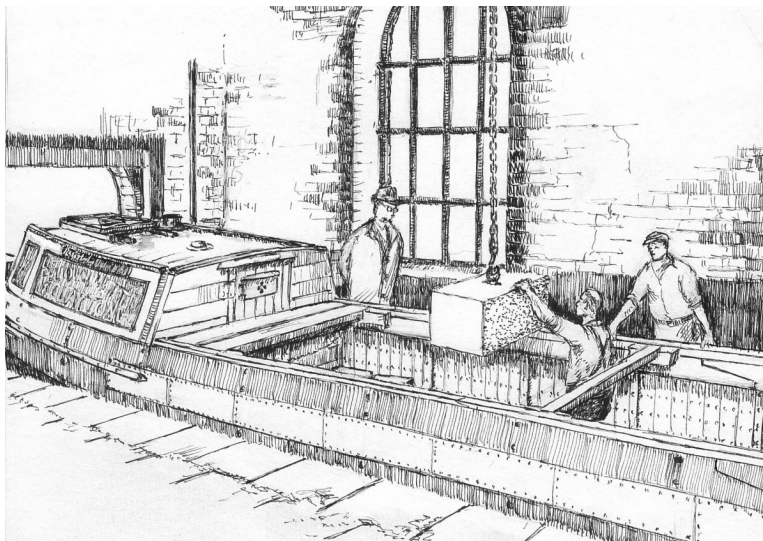
Watercolour of *Dudley Castle from Tipton Canal* by J M W Turner c1832. The painting showing Dudley town, Dudley Castle, the lime kilns and canal boats. A vivid depiction of the changes brought by the industrial revolution on the west midlands. Source: blackcountryhistory.org

Boat gauger and grocer: Thomas Skidmore (1787-1851) and Jane Pardo (1792-1876)

Jeremiah's older brother, **Thomas Skidmore** (1787-1851) married **Jane Pardo** (1792-1876) in 1810 in Dudley. They moved from there to live at Church Lane, Summer Hill in Tipton until 1836 and then moved to Witton Lane, Hill Top in West Bromwich. Originally a coal miner, the 1841 census describes Thomas as a clerk in the coal industry and his eldest son Thomas worked on the canals as a boat loader. In the 1851 census Thomas senior's occupation is described as a boat gauger, an official who gauges the weight of cargo being carried by judging how deep a boat sat in the water. Weights would be loaded onto new boats to record the displacement and by this system, the weight of cargo could be calculated and the appropriate levy charged. He also became an official of the local Methodist society.



Tipton Gauging Station opened in 1873. Photo: 1957 Source: captainahabswaterytales.blogspot.com



Boat gauging: loading one - ton weights into a canal boat. Drawing by Edward Paget-Tomlinson. Source: Birmingham Canal Navigations Society

By the time of his death at the age of 64 in 1851, Thomas had become a colliery agent but was also partially blind. According to his death certificate he died of 'apoplexy' (a stroke) at Hateley Heath, which is next to Hill Top. His brother Jeremiah recorded in his bible that Thomas died at the Rough Hay Colliery at Darlaston (possibly where his son David worked). Perhaps he collapsed at the colliery and died at home. For 26 years after her husband's death Jane continued to live at Witton Lane, near her sons Thomas and David, making a living as a grocer. She died in 1876 aged 84 years.



A canal and locks at Tipton.
Photo: early 20th century.
Source: tiptoncivicsociety.co

Between 1811 and 1834 Thomas and Jane had ten children: five girls and five boys, all living to adulthood, although their eldest daughter Mary died at the age of 24. Two of the other daughters married miners and one married a coach-locksmith. Of the sons, one was a shingler^{iv}, one a grocer, another an iron-roller^v, and the other two, John and David, eventually became Non-conformist preachers, Wesleyan and Baptist respectively.



West Bromwich Academy, Witton Lane in 1901 (demolished 1966), a private school in the home of Richard Witton. This would have been a familiar sight to the Skidmores who lived in Witton Lane. Source: Sandwell Public Libraries and British History Online.

Provisions dealer and dressmaker: David (1823-1877) and Elizabeth Skidmore (1824-1898)

Thomas and Jane's son **David** was born at Summer Hill, Tipton in 1823. He worked at first as a colliery clerk with his brother John (possibly at Rough Hay Colliery, Darlaston – this colliery was bought from Mr. D. Skidmore, maybe a relation, by Addenbrooke, Smith and Pidcock in 1857 and was one of the largest in the area). David then became a grocer and provisions dealer (as he is described in the 1861 census) and like his father, a boat gauger. Like his brother John he also followed a religious vocation and became a Baptist minister (as described in the 1871 census).

David married a dressmaker **Elizabeth Cox** and they lived all their lives in West Bromwich in Wood's Lane and then Witton Lane. He died at the age of 54 in 1877, after which Elizabeth moved to Guns Lane to live with her sons Joseph and Thomas. In 1891 she was living with son Thomas and daughter Elizabeth at 8 Trinity Street. She died in 1898 at the age of 74.

David and Elizabeth had five children. The first baby, Thomas was born in 1851 and died that year. Their other four children survived into adulthood. **John**, an ironworker, was born in 1852, then Elizabeth was born in 1856. She became a servant and a cook. In 1858 Joseph Beaumont was born, described as a Holloware warehouseman in 1881, and in 1862 Thomas Sylvanus was born - appropriately named, he became a gardener. It seems that Thomas and Elizabeth did not marry but looked after their mother until her death.

Outdoor preaching

The various Non-conformist movements, but particularly Methodism begun by John Wesley, found fertile ground amongst the working classes of Britain. The passionate evangelical preaching of Wesley and others, frowned upon by the Anglican Church, and the preaching of rousing sermons and hymn singing outdoors and at the workplace, became very popular amongst those who often felt excluded from the established Church of England. Saving the working classes from their sins was their mission.



A canal family at Tipton on the Main Line, with the *Fountain Inn* in the background c1850s. These were the people that open air preachers hoped to reach. Source: The Annals of Tipton website

The Evangelist of West Bromwich John Skidmore (1817-1899)

Thomas and Jane's son John (1817-1899) achieved quite a reputation as an outdoor Wesleyan preacher, and became known as the 'Evangelist of West Bromwich' and the 'Middle Lock Evangelist'. Between 1861 and 1890, he was famous for preaching open-air services on Sundays during summertime to canal boatmen at Middle Lock, between Spon Lane and Bromford Lane on the Birmingham Canal. Apparently, his audiences could be as great as 20,000. He had begun his working life as a miner, then in an iron-works as a puddler^{vi} and later a clerk in a colliery before becoming a preacher and 'home missionary'. John's chief concern was the moral and social welfare of working people and he became extremely popular throughout the Midlands. The subjects of his sermons were such things as: 'Manliness' and 'Young Men and Fathers'.

Below is some 'fan mail' published in the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* of August 30th 1866:

To the Editor of the Daily Gazette.

SIR—The grandest sight I ever saw I beheld last Sunday afternoon, at a place called Middle Lock, near West Bromwich. It was the concluding service of a series of open-air meetings, conducted by Mr. John Skidmore, Home Missionary, employed by Lord Calthorpe and Mr. Thomas Bagnall. Perhaps from ten to eleven thousand persons were present. There were in attendance the leading singers and musicians of the district. The service commenced by singing the Old Hundredth. After reading a portion of Scripture and prayer by the Rev. C. Pass, and the singing of the *Te Deum*, Mr. Skidmore delivered a very eloquent and telling address, which was listened to with great seriousness and deep feeling. At the close of the sermon the band struck up with the chorus "The glory of the Lord," &c. Mr. Thomas Davis, J.P., spoke a short time to the assembly, and offered up a prayer that will long be remembered. Then followed the "Hallelujah Chorus," and finally the Doxology and Benediction. Afterwards the vast multitude quietly separated and walked in an orderly manner from the ground along the sides of the canals and other pathways to the adjacent towns and villages. The grand sight, the beautiful singing, the powerful sermon, and earnest prayers will remain fresh on my mind for weeks and months to come. By letting this appear in your excellent daily paper for the encouragement of the parties concerned, you will greatly oblige yours respectfully,

ONE WHO WAS MUCH PLEASED,
AND PROFITTED.

August 27th, 1866.



Far left: The brother of David Skidmore, John Skidmore and his wife Elizabeth (nee Sheldon Woodward). John was known as the 'Evangelist of West Bromwich' and the 'Middle Lock Preacher'. Source: Sandwell Community History.

Left: Grave of John Skidmore and his wife Elizabeth, at Heath Lane Cemetery, West Bromwich. Source: findagrave.com



Heath lane Cemetery, where the assault on John Skidmore (1817-1899) took place in 1875. Source: John Brown on <https://www.pinterest.com.au>

Cemetery assault

Not everyone was John's admirer. He also conducted funerals, and at one such event at the West Bromwich Cemetery (Heath Lane) in 1875, he began to conduct the burial rites to a Catholic pauper's interment, being unaware of the dead man's religion. This consequently brought upon him the wrath of two elderly Catholic mourners who beat him with their umbrellas. John survived and the body was buried anyway.



View from Middle Lock near Tipton on the Birmingham Main Line in 2010, the area where John Skidmore preached outdoors. Source: nbepiphany.co.uk

Sheet iron waste bundler: John Skidmore (1852-1898) and Sarah Jane Colley (1852-1900)

This is where the religious calling in our Skidmore line ends. David and Elizabeth's son John was a stocktaker at 18 years of age in 1871 when living with his parents in Witton's Lane, West Bromwich. He married **Sarah Jane Colley**, daughter of miner **William Colley**, also of West Bromwich, at Holy Trinity on April 4th 1875. In 1881 they were living at 7 Pleasant Street Hill Top with their three children: Hannah, **John William** and Sarah Jane. John senior was then a sheet iron waste bundler^{vii}. By 1891 the family consisted of five children: baby Sarah Jane had died in her first year and since then Florence, David and another Sarah Jane had been born. The eldest son, John William, was also working in the iron industry as an iron roller's assistant at age 13. They were all living at 13 Old Meeting Street in West Bromwich.



Holy Trinity West Bromwich where John Skidmore married Sarah Jane Colley on April 4th 1875. Source: <http://www.churches-uk-ireland.org>

Early deaths

However, everything had changed by 1901. John died in 1898 at the age of only 46 and Sarah Jane died in 1900 of 'acute hepatitis' at the age of 48. They are both buried in the West Bromwich Cemetery (Heath Lane).

After their parents died, all the siblings, except for John William, remained in West Bromwich. By the 1901 census, the eldest daughter Hannah, an envelope maker aged 24, was the head of the family. Florence, now 18 worked as a domestic servant, David aged 14 was employed in the iron industry and Sarah Jane was only 12. They all lived at 6e John Street, Swan Village. Meanwhile John William changed occupation to become a roofing slater. In the 1901 census he is a 23-year-old working in Dukinfield, Chester. The following year he married **Mary Amelia Smith**, moved to Coventry, and in 1911 emigrated to Australia.



J & S Roberts Swan Village
Iron Foundry c1885 Source:
blackcountrymuse.com

Ann Hurley

2020

See my story **Trade Unionist and Tiler** for more about John William Skidmore.

hurleyskidmorehistory.com

Notes:

ⁱ A collier is a coal miner. Also, a broad term encompassing many jobs working in coal mines or in transporting coal.

ⁱⁱ A nailor is a metalworker who produced nails.

ⁱⁱⁱ Holloware is metal items such as tea and coffee pots, sugar bowls etc.

^{iv} A shingler worked in the manufacture of iron or steel. Shingling is a stage in the production of bar iron or steel, where the metal is reshaped.

^v An iron roller operated machinery to roll and shape iron.

^{vi} An iron puddler is a skilled craftsman who worked in a foundry making wrought iron. Ref: Hewit, Jane - *Dictionary of Old Occupations* <https://www.familyresearcher.co.uk/>

^{vii} A bundler would work at the furnace of an ironworks with the puddlers and millmen dependent upon him. (source: *Human Capital and Institutions: A Long-Run View* ed. Eltis, Lewis and Sokolov (2009). Also, a sheet iron bundler makes up flat plates or sheets into bundles and clips or clamps bundles by bending steel strips over sides, and hammering or clamping them down, or by binding with wire (Source: *A Dictionary of Occupational Terms Based on the Classification of Occupations used in the Census of Population, 1921.*)

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